

URBAN OPEN SPACE PROVISION

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The purpose of this paper is to identify some of the problems encountered in open space provision, with particular reference to provision in Ireland. What has happened in the past is obviously one guide to what is happening presently and the paper, taking this as its starting point, begins by briefly recounting the history of urban open space. It then reviews the research tradition in this field of study and the manner in which geographers have been singularly slow to undertake qualitative research. This is followed by a discussion of the difficulties encountered in the area of definition. Finally, the paper examines the inherent flaws in the methods of provision currently adopted by Irish local authorities.

Open space is a fundamental land use which from the earliest of times has been a part of the urban fabric. The first cities are known to have contained agricultural allotments, orchards, ceremonial gardens and other places of natural beauty within their walls, symbolising, perhaps, the close bond that existed between town and country during the early stage of ancient urbanisation. It is also likely, according to Mumford (1966), that the town square had first made an appearance by the year 2000 BC at least, in which case the origins of one of the most enduring forms of open space are almost as old as the city itself.

In the successive phases of urbanisation that followed the initial period of city building open space remained an integral part of the urban milieu. The most distinctive elements of Greek and Roman cities, the agora and forum respectively, were both outdoor meeting places, a function which the market place and the public green later assumed in medieval times. It was not until the late nineteenth century, however, when cities were built at densities so high as to almost exclude open space, that this component became a major planning concern. At a time when the countryside was being pushed progressively further from more and more people, Man's immediate instinct was to recapture the open nature of earlier

cities and the perceived benefits derived from rus in urbe. In recent decades continued urbanisation, a growth in leisure time and an associated increased demand for recreational facilities have placed an unprecedented significance on open space. It presently accounts for one-fifth of all land in Western cities.

While the need for open space, and in particular, urban recreational space has long been evident, researchers have been slow to acknowledge the fact. Lack of information, therefore, is a fundamental problem encountered by many local authorities in their provision of open space. It was not until the 1970s that the subject was considered worthy of serious investigation in itself and geographical interest in this particular land use has been surprisingly subdued. The growing significance of rural-based recreation has been a particular hindrance to development in this respect. Open space research remains firmly in favour of non-urban inquiry, a precedent which was established as early as the 1930s when American geographers became the first in their profession to study recreation in the countryside. Within the city, a further bias has ensured that apart from formal parks and sports facilities, urban spaces have been largely exempt from investigation. Because parks and playing pitches are designated recreational areas, ostensibly occupying valuable land, they should be seen, presumably, to fulfil their intended functions. For this reason they became the centre of research attention in the last decade, while less grandiose and less capital intensive spaces remained largely ignored. In Ireland, research has been particularly scant. However, rapid urbanisation of Irish society was a phenomenon of the 1960s, so it is hardly surprising that the data-base for open space provision in this country is singularly crude. Surveys conducted by city corporations have been stock-taking exercises for the most part concentrating on the geographic distribution of space. Clearly, their value is limited, since they provide no indication as to whether or not we are making the best use of existing open space.

Another difficulty encountered by researchers and planners alike relates to definition. Despite its long history, open space is a term of reference which is frequently misunderstood. It is usually equated with recreational areas, more specifically with those areas administered by a public agency for the benefit of public recreation. This, however, is a misleading interpretation,

since open space and land in recreation use are not synonymous. The most comprehensive definition of the term is that contained in the British Open Space Consolidating Act of 1906 which describes open space as follows:

... any land, whether enclosed or not, on which there are no buildings, or of which not more than one-twentieth part is covered with buildings and the whole of the remainder of which is laid out as a garden or is used for purposes of recreation or lies waste or unoccupied.

In its widest sense, therefore, open space refers to all areas of the city open to the sky. Transportation arteries, vacant land, water bodies, even the space and light around buildings are all accounted for by the aforementioned piece of legislation. Moreover, the problem of definition is further compounded when one attempts to delimit the functions of open space. These functions are not easily interpreted and Jacobs' (1965) description of city parks as places that are not automatically anything could well apply to all open space. However, a useful classification to refer to in this regard is that of Wright, Braithwaite and Forster (1976) who indicate that open space meets human needs, conserves biophysical resources and shapes urban form.

The presence of 'hidden' or informal spaces is a further hindrance to the formulation of open space policy. Formal spaces, as far as may be ascertained, are designated recreational areas such as parks and playgrounds. These are automatically included in any open space stock-taking exercise. In contrast, informal spaces are not officially ascribed a recreational function, yet they are seen to be used by people for recreational purposes. The manner in which these spaces are identified and recorded is problematic and depends, among other things, on the ability of a surveyor to uncover them. They include street systems, car parks, vacant land, derelict sites, a mosaic of what may be termed low-order spaces, the intimacy and informality of which are likely to exert a powerful attraction for people wishing to pursue casual or spontaneous recreation.

It is the existence of these informal spaces which highlights the inadequacies and outmoded nature of the traditional approach adopted by Irish local authorities to open space provision. Local authorities here are presently committed to a 'standards' approach, whereby a specified number of hectares of open space are provided,

either per 1,000 head of the population or as a percentage of gross site area. The phenomenon of standards is, in fact, merely a crude yard-stick against which the quantity of formal recreational space may be measured. It is a technique which is doubtlessly convenient, but the emphasis on maintaining areal standards clearly presents a deceptive picture when analysing the present state of provision: quantitative standards neither take account of informal space, nor make a statement regarding qualitative provision; in addition, they may vary between local authorities.

A standard currently in vogue among Irish local authorities is the ten per cent system. This method of provision designates one-tenth of all new housing estates as public open space. The principal flaw in such a standard is easily detected: because open space is only provided as a percentage of the gross site area, the ten per cent system discriminates against the people living in local authority housing areas, where the population density is usually high. Neither does such a method of provision take into account either the use to which the land is put, or the people for whom it is provided. Clearly, a builder must initially obtain the approval of the appropriate planning authority for all housing development plans, but the sanctioning process is such that individual estates tend to be considered in isolation. In terms of open space provision, this means that every estate has a required ten per cent of its site reserved, usually, as a green area, without any onus on the developer to ensure hierarchical open space planning at a district level. The effects of such a policy are self-evident. More often than not, the allotted ten per cent is the product of a feeble attempt at cosmetic application to leftover scraps of land. Cork Corporation (1984), for example, has itself criticised the lack of play opportunities available to young children on the large featureless tracts of grass or small greens left over after the roads and houses in new estates have been designed. It is worth considering, however, that the city planners have themselves failed to delineate the functions of these spaces. There exists only a vague notion that they cater for certain unspecified recreational needs, while simultaneously ensuring some measure of visual relief in an otherwise built-up environment.

The greatest weakness of the standards approach lies in its preoccupation with total provision and its failure to provide proper

guidance as to location and development. Glasgow Corporation (1975) has found that reliance on standards has led in several instances to the misallocation of particular types of open space, a typical example being the provision of children's play equipment near housing units where there were no youngsters within the age limits for which such a facility was intended. Such occurrences, where there has been a failure to relate open space provision to basic demand more than justify the need for user population surveys as part of the open space planning process. Moreover, what the Glasgow experience suggests is that there should be a continuous reassessment made of open space types to determine whether or not their functions, as perceived by local authorities, are serving the needs of the population at any given time. What it also suggests is that open space should be renewable or adaptable, altering its function(s) to facilitate a user population which, in terms of age, and therefore, demands, does not remain static. As it is, the ten per cent system and others like it encourage the misconception that provision is an end in itself, an assumption which has led in the past to many packets of dead or unused spaces.

Most local authorities, I feel, would acknowledge that they cannot provide for all our recreational needs in towns and cities. Equally I feel that the absence of relatively clear-cut definitions, along with an outmoded standards approach to provision, has meant that we are not making the best possible use of existing urban open space. Moreover, the presence of informal space means that we don't actually know how much there is and what contribution it might make to easing the pressures increasingly exerted on the finite land resources of the city.

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